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Riding the waves of collaborative-writing-as-inquiry: some ontological creative detours

Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt

Abstract

We are interested in collaborative writing as a process of 'writing to it': how, whatever it is we are seeking to examine or explore, 'writing to it' is what leads to new experimentations and productive writing practices. In this chapter we take the notion of 'writing to it' further in picking up this book's necessary and urgent call for finding ways to resist the hegemony of 'conventional' academic writing. Through writing both with and against notions of 'creativity' and 'detours', we bring the two together as we seek to reconceptualise *creative detours* even as we follow them; or – better – as they take us with them. We write our collaborative way into an ontological re-configuring of creative detours.

Key words: collaborative writing; Deleuze and Guattari; place; materiality

Bios

Ken Gale

Ken works in the Institute of Education at Plymouth University and has published widely and presented at a number of international conferences on the philosophy of education and collaborative approaches to education practices. His recent work involves the use of affective modes of theorising as practice in relation to the intra-active entanglements within and between discursive and representational constructions and human and nonhuman materialities in contemporary higher education settings.

Jonathan Wyatt

Jonathan is a senior lecturer at The University of Edinburgh, where he is Director of Counselling, Psychotherapy and Applied Social Sciences and director of the new [Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry](#). He has taken many a detour, some more creative than others, to find himself in Edinburgh. His article with Beatrice Allegranti, *Witnessing loss: A feminist material-discursive account*, won the 2015 Norman K. Denzin Qualitative Research Award

and his recent books include *On (writing) families: Autoethnographies of presence and absence, love and loss*, co-edited with Tony Adams and published by Sense.

Riding the waves of collaborative-writing-as-inquiry: some ontological creative detours

Ken Gale and Jonathan Wyatt

We, as the two of us as well as in other assemblages, have been writing collaboratively (about collaborative writing) for over ten years. Most recently, we have been exploring the idea of our writing together as a process of ‘writing to it’ (Gale & Wyatt, 2016): how, whatever it is we are seeking to examine or explore, ‘writing to it’ is what leads to new experimentations and productive writing practices.

In this chapter we take the notion of ‘writing to it’ further in picking up this book’s necessary and urgent call for finding ways to resist the hegemony of ‘conventional’ academic writing (see also Gale, Speedy & Wyatt, 2010). Through writing both with and against notions of ‘creativity’ and ‘detours’, we bring the two together as we seek to reconceptualise *creative detours* even as we follow them; or – better – as they take us with them. We write our collaborative way into an ontological re-configuring of creative detours.

We began writing this chapter through our familiar *between-the-tuos* (Gale & Wyatt, 2009), each in turn exchanging attachments via email; and we then ‘played’ with the texts. This ‘playing’ involved re-ordering, splicing and adapting them, searching for how the texts spoke to one another; to, through, past, with, between and beyond each other, seeking connections, dissonances, echoes and refrains. This processual engagement involved a creative collaborative series of turning and returning to the texts, suggesting lines of flight, taking detours, always moving the work in different directions.

Ken’s writing is in plain text from here; Jonathan’s is italicised.

The impossibility of detours

I have been thinking about, writing about and engaging in, what I consider to be creative practice, for a long time. I realised this morning, as I was engaging in all kinds of displacement activity before writing to this topic, that my first publication of anything to do with education and research was a chapter that was published in an edited collection some fifteen years ago called 'Teacher Education within Post-Compulsory Education and Training: A Call for a Creative Approach' (Gale, 2001). Making tea, replying to emails, reading a newly published paper sent to me by a colleague, continuing with these displacement activities as day, I read through my chapter again. I felt saddened a little by its seeming naivety and somewhat surprised that, even at that early stage of my life engaging in academic research and writing, I was able to express some disquiet about the way that 'creativity' had been treated as an object of inquiry in the years preceding the publication of my piece. Without spending time going over the detail of that writing within the emerging context of our chapter here, suffice it to say that what might be involved in conceptualising creativity has always interested, troubled and excited me, to the extent that it somehow remains with me as a vibrant, vital and animating conceptualisation as I continue writing and engaging in inquiry today. I understand concepts to be fixed as substantive categories of difference, whereas I understand conceptualisation as involving active processes of concept making, where each making of a concept is a creative act in itself; it is an encounter, an event.

Saturday, just over a week ago, was a dazzling early autumn day in Edinburgh. I was alone.

In the afternoon I walked.

Close to home, a few minutes north down the hill and away from the city, you can step down from the roads onto an emergence of paths. They take you along, across, and away from the Water of Leith – a stream, no more, that becomes, perhaps three miles further northeast, the Firth of Forth.

It's been a demanding month. I, somehow, somewhere, knew I needed to walk. I didn't 'think' it. It happened. I found myself walking. I don't often walk, but I knew I needed to look up at the branches of trees, to feel fallen leaves and firm earth beneath my feet, to have the sun strike my face and hands.

Most of the paths are well established and broad; they're busy with cyclists and walkers, especially at the weekend. To begin with I walked on a familiar route – from the road, through a children's play area, through a tunnel under a different road and out towards Leith. It's a route I used to run until I decided it was time to give my knees a break. I don't run anymore.

I knew where this path would take me, but I hadn't decided I would follow it or, once on it, whether I would stay. A pair of runners overtook me. A family on bikes passed, talking, ringing a single-tone bell to warn me, though they didn't need to. Their voices were loud and cheerful. I heard them some distance back.

I came to a crossroads. The crossroads stopped me. (I was going to write: 'I stopped', but that conveys too strong a sense of 'my' agency.) The crossroads-and-I held the body-I-call-mine steady. Paused me. We paused. I looked at the signposts. I didn't recognise all the names. The left turn to Trinity chose me. (Which sounds grandiose: the left turn to Trinity and I found ourselves together.)

Hold there. Let's hold just there – now – at that moment of left turn. That step. Those steps. That series of shifts in body weight; the eyes, ears, face, feet, torso, organs, 'bodying', turning this way, that way, not as one, not as a ship might turn, a conflicting mix of push and pull, of loss and hope; a heartbeat of flux.

Hold. Freeze the frame there. But let's not 'stand outside' or 'back from' it, so we can 'reflect upon' it; let's stay within. Let's honour its-and-our, the moment's, immanence: 'a vibrant, vital and animating conceptualisation', as you write.

You will notice the shift that moves us away from the use of the word 'concept' toward that of 'conceptualisation'. You will recognise this; in our writing this has been done numerous times before. In doing this here I want to emphasise the precedence that Whitehead gives to process over substance in his work and to mobilise this thinking in terms of making a new 'creative detour', which I will offer as an understanding as a Deleuzian 'line of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 88-9). I love the way in which their conceptualisation of 'lines of flight' offers great challenge to the dominance and pre-eminence of, what they describe as, 'order words' in the fields of inquiry in which we are learning to make play. This troubling of 'order words' is not simply something to do with language and the kinds of discourses that set up notions of 'creativity', for example, as objects of inquiry. I feel greatly influenced by them when they use these 'lines of flight' to encourage a 'bursting out of containment' (ibid, p. 88), something which I sense is more to do with substance and materiality than simply the words that are used to culturally and discursively inscribe it. In this it feels to me that enabling and enacting 'lines of flight' is hugely processual, it is active, it is about 'territorialisation' (op. cit): it does.

I am sure that you have found me here! You have often discovered me playing, dancing and working with these Deleuzian conceptualisations in the writing and inquiry with which we have been engaged for a long time. You know that they have been with me in ever changing ways for nearly as long as the writing of the chapter that I have referenced above initially took form. The sharing of them with you is full of delight and it is exciting. In terms of the current piece of writing, this sharing is reciprocal, it is iterative, it is, as we have emphasised so many times, collaborative; it is a form of sharing, as we have recently discussed, that is constituted by a practice of 'writing to it' (Gale & Wyatt, 2016).

Stephanie Springgay and colleagues have a fascinating website, www.walkinglab.org, where they offer a multiplicity of takes on walking. Walking as fluidity and possibility. One contributor invites us to consider how walking for some is a form of labour. Carry something and walk, she says. Across your shoulders. Feel it. Another offers 'evaporation walking' as a

practice for letting go of grief. “The gesture of carrying evaporated water is a metaphor for carrying a dying body. Along the way, perceived boundaries between space and matter soften.” (<http://walkinglab.org/evaporation-walks/>)

The body that walks is not the individuated, humanist subject moving through passive space, “but body-space-matter created through movement, differentiating endlessly. This movement is intensive, flowing and affective.” (Truman & Springgay, 2015, p.151)

Last Saturday and that left turn, that creative not-detour: Hope. Delight. Sadness. Affects that ‘de-phased’ (Manning, 2013) at that instant, then. Add wistfulness, now, as I write, telling you this one week later:

“[E]nabling and enacting ‘lines of flight’ is hugely processual, it is active, it is about territorialisation: it does.”

From there, from that left turn, as I walked, there were moments, sometimes minutes, when I was alone.

There was a bridge over other paths. The clearance from trees allowed me to stand full in the sun. I stopped and turned to it, allowing it to envelop me, stood a few minutes. No one came past.

At one point I heard voices above the path. Shouts. The sound of a match – rugby or football, I wasn’t sure. I found a worn track up the short steep bank. I made it only half-way up and no further; I couldn’t maintain a grip. The match, the excitement, the energy, the company, just out of reach. I slipped back down and walked on. The voices took minutes to fade.

Later, a ramp to my left joined the path, a gentle slope down from a quiet road. At its top I saw an older woman turn onto it as if to walk down. She was hesitant, neither still nor moving, leaning on her walking frame. A wire-haired terrier trotted into view, pausing at her side, and they began to walk down towards the path. They moved together. I watched as I passed. I knew it wasn’t, knew it couldn’t be, but I imagined for those seconds it was my

mother I was watching. Her dog close by, devoted; the way she carried herself (stooped, delicate, careful); how she talked to him; their intimacy.

This is where our writing has led me. Here, to this walk. I'm resisting making explicit why and how it happened that our writing brought me (and now you) here, not because I 'know' and am withholding but because I'm unsure and can only leave this uncertainty intact. I want to respect it:

“[E]nabling and enacting ‘lines of flight’ is hugely processual, it is active, it is about territorialisation: it does.”

At Swim-Two-Birdsⁱ or maybe more?

“We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else. It is not immanence to life, but the immanent that is in nothing is itself a life. A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is complete power, complete bliss.”

(Deleuze, 2001, p. 27)

I have written so much with and to you and, yes, perhaps less so, with others, about the place that I go to swim. I call it ‘place’ and yet it is more credible to describe in sense making terms as space. It has a name so, for now, it is a place. That is an identifier, it represents, it does in particular ways. The naming is simply functional, I have to use it to signify and I always rebel against significations: you know that. So ‘Whitsand Bay’ is a ‘place’ that I ‘spatialise’ (Soja, 1996): as a ‘place’ it is always there, in space, in space making, it is always different. What happens in this ‘place’ when I am there is always different, I always make sense of it in different ways, in space it does things to me, in nonhuman ways it *does*. When I read your ‘walking story’ through the park in Edinburgh it had a powerful impact upon me. I sensed that some of this power emerged out of, out of our, relationality; I thought about what you had shared with me to do with the pressures that you had experienced at work over the

last few months and about your views to do with friendship in relation to your life in Edinburgh. This prompted me to think about this place that I go to, this place that I love. I began to wonder about someone secretly watching me as I turned this place into a space, my space, perhaps. I began to wonder if that person was curious enough and they wanted to stand there at the top of the cliff, unobserved, and watch me doing what I do there, again and again, would they see me doing the same things, again and again?

“That series of shifts in body weight; the eyes, ears, face, feet, torso, organs, ‘bodying’, turning this way, that way, not as one, not as a ship might turn, a conflicting mix of push and pull, of loss and hope; a heartbeat of flux.”

You can imagine if you like. I can share a naming of my doing of these things:

Climbing ... clambering down the slippery, narrow, brambled, often hidden cliff path ... stopping, watching Brimstone and Peacock butterflies seeming to sunbathe in limp autumn light, or secretive Stonechats nervously hopping from one gorse bush to another, clearly irritated by the presence of their observer ... moving through the rushes at the base of the cliff ... pulling off flip-flops ... hop, skip and jumping over the massive boulders there ... bounding in one excited leap on to the warm gritty sand ... walking, like a tourist, across the empty beach ... looking for a patch of welcoming, dry sand ... sitting ... hurriedly unpacking a bag, (towel, swimming trunks, notebook, pen, reading book, glasses, phone, banana, apple; *The Things They Carried*) ... changing into swimming trunks ... standing, legs apart, hands on hips ... looking at the sea, looking across to Rame, at the sky ... walking down the beach to the water ... looking again, left and right and back up the cliff ... walking in the water, slowly at first, ankle deep in the shore break, a brief initial hesitancy perhaps, speeding up, purposeful, striding through the heaving, breaking of the swells, diving under and through the first wave that lifts its self above the others, then through another, surfacing, a sudden furious splashing out, another wave, duck, dive, emerge, swimming, laterally across the waves to where the break begins ... swimming slowly, treading water ... looking back to the shore ... looking out to sea, beyond the break ... waiting ... spotting ... turning ...

swimming strong swim-strides in the growing, catching of the not yet breaking wave and then, body lifting, the wave taking over and the searing, tumbling ride beginning, heaving, rushing, ending in sand filled floundering in the shallows of the shore break ... walking out into the waves again, into newly forming waves ... breathing more deeply now, chest pumping, face grinning ... heading into the deeper water ... watching for the next big wave , the next rushing ride and then ... doing it again ... and again ... and again ...

I can picture this, yes; though 'picture' is too visual. I can hear it, feel sand under my feet, am being lifted by the swell, sense anticipation in my lower chest as the wave takes me. My breathing – sitting here in Edinburgh on our sofa on an early Thursday morning – deepens with yours. I read on.

This is how it is. These are the verbs. This is the body doing. This is what a body can do. These are bodies; Bennett calls them 'things', in human/nonhuman relationality: *Ken-sand-waves-tide-current-wind-sun relationality as assemblage*, as always becoming other, always in the making, world-making. 'Thing-power' (Bennett, 2010). In these body-doings there is an impossibility of separated objective individuality. These 'Ken-sand-waves-tide-current-wind-sun relationalities as assemblage' offer, in appropriation of Bennett, a *windowing* 'onto an eccentric out-side ... made possible by the fortuity of that particular assemblage (and) ... also by a certain anticipatory readiness on my in-side, by a perceptual style open to the appearance of thing-power.' (ibid, p. 5). This 'windowing' is not a casting of light, it is not meant to offer signification, interpretation and representation, it is simply a doing, an experiment in world making, an expression. The creative act of expression both lives with and constructs worlds through sensing 'thing-power', through making present experimental relationalities that live in the flows, harmonies and refrains of rhythmic human/nonhuman animation. The expression of '*a life*' (Deleuze, 2001, p. 27) in these vibratory relationalities is *windowed* in and through the doings, the animations, that are the creative energising life force of these *Ken-sand-waves-tide-current-wind-sun* becomings.

As Manning says, “(an) emphasis on expression leads us away from a signifying subject to a becoming of relation.” (2007, p. 111). Bennett’s engagement with ‘thing-power’, with Spinoza, sees such relationality as involving animations which break through the binary separation of human and nonhuman and which sees all ‘things’ as having power, albeit in different degrees. Deleuze and Guattari, without equivocation, alert us to the fact that the smallest unit is the assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) and so there is a becoming aware of the observer at the top of the cliff at Whitsand Bay, looking down from above and there is a wondering here about what that seeing might involve. These seeings are doings; they are not simply representational, they exist in relationality and in this sense they must be seen, not with the subjective eye of the individualising Cartesian ‘I’ but within and through the processual individuations of always relational becoming: “Beyond the human, beyond the sense of touch or vision, beyond the object, what emerges is relation” (Manning, 2009, p. 42).

So in sensing ‘a life’, a life engaged in these animations, involved in these doings, present within and activating these vibrant relationalities, intoxicated by these world-makings and irrepressibly bringing to life these expressions, already new and exciting dialogics of assemblage are (always) emerging from their larval slumber. As this writing also comes to life it is not engaged in making expressions that offer statements of fact or verifiable certitude; as Manning says, “(to) express is to speak-with. Any speaking-with implies a dialogue, an infinite conversation. An infinite conversation supposes that the work is yet to be invented”. (2007, p. 111) And so the creative rhizomatic possibilities that emerge from the non-representational vigour of these conversations encourages an engagement with language in its experimentally most productive form. In this sense language is always invoking and giving breath and the very lifeblood to the ‘body-without-organs’ (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). In these respects creative expression always ‘windows’, challenges and lives outside of the pacifying regulatory practices of organised bodies, human and nonhuman. In these world-makings that always pose Spinoza’s beautifully practical and

rhetorically weighted question, 'What can a body do?' we are always expressing and bringing to life the ontologically vibrant and ethically sensitised relational possibilities of becoming in worlds that are always not-yet-known.

Riding waves

We return to this hegemonic plain font, the one that implies 'normal' (the font that has been 'Ken's' in this chapter), for our first person plural voice as we draw to a close.

We sense that 'writing to it' is part of what Barad describes as an 'ethico-onto-epistemology ... an intertwining of ethics, knowing, and being' (2007, p. 185). It is perhaps, what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe as 'becoming', where the multiplicity of our engagements, our theorisings-as-practice, our processes of world making are constitutive of being in the world. Barad offers an evocative description of this when she asserts that

"each intra-action matters, since the possibilities for what the world may become call out in the pause that precedes each breath before a moment comes into being and the world is remade again, because the becoming of the world is a deeply ethical matter" (op. cit.).

So it seems that these practices that we call 'writing to it' are creative practices which are deeply and crucially infused with these practices of affective world making. It is not to make 'creative detours' that are based upon reflection or to make an interpretation or a critical engagement with what might be the best course of action in a particular situation. Rather, we feel that it is about an immersion in the world where the animation of bodies is always about the potential of those bodies to *do*, to actively engage the world and to be concerned, with Spinoza, with what these bodies can do. There is a clear and incisive politics of affect present in Nietzsche's mistrust of concepts when he says:

"(We) must no longer accept concepts as a gift, nor merely purify, and polish them, but first make and create them, present them and make them convincing. Hitherto

one has generally trusted one's concepts as if they were a wonderful dowry from some sort of wonderland." (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 409)

It is this that leads us to thinking about what these creative practices, these 'creative detours' perhaps, actually involve: what will this body do, what will these bodies do when carrying them out? For Deleuze and Guattari,

"(c)oncepts are not waiting for us ready-made, like heavenly bodies ... They must be invented, fabricated, or rather, created, and would be nothing without the creator's signature" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 5).

This seems to provide a clear answer to these questions. We don't accept those concepts that are "already waiting for us ready-made"; at best we mistrust them and engage selves in active concept making, processes of conceptualisation, in short, in creative practices. Simply taking them off the shelf, offering them up, purifying and polishing them is not enough. The practices of reflexivity, interpretation and critique so loved by the academy all have a tendency to do this; they seem to accept the wonderlands from where these concepts originate and delight in looking with delight and growing self-esteem at the reflections that their polishings provide. By setting up these concepts as categories of difference and as objects of inquiry these established orthodoxies of practice implicitly engage in and bring to life processes of reification that have the potential to cause experimentation and creativity to wither and die.

Therefore, creative practices are more than taking or making 'detours'. Creative practices of concept forming, always involving active conceptualisation, are the very processual activities that trouble the reified substantialities of conventional inquiry. They are not simply about changing the concept from one thing, once classified object of inquiry, to another through practices of critical interpretation, they involve selves in doing, in engaging in affective forms of inquiry that animate doing-bodies in ethical, political and always experimentally infused

ways. As Massumi says, it is about “thought taking the plunge, consenting to ride the waves of affect on a crest of words, drenched to the conceptual bone in the fineness of its spray” (2015, p. vii).

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ⁱ *At Swim-Two-Birds* is the title of a novel by Flann O'Brien. It is an example of what has been referred to as metafiction in which a number of stories become intertwined with each other.